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Art for the Disappeared

Cassandra Cronin

“Los desaparecidos no existen, no están ni vivos ni muertos, simplemente no existen.” This quote, spoken by General Jorge Rafael Videla, the president of Argentina during the height of the Dirty War (1976-1983), translates as, “The disappeared do not exist, they are neither alive nor dead, they simply do not exist” (Graham-Yooll 6). This quote reveals the pervasive loss of identity that accompanied the Dirty War, an operation led by the military dictatorship to take out political opponents. Nobody was safe from the suspicion, terror, repression, and paranoia that ruled this period of human rights violations. As people were “disappearing” across the country, a group called the “Mothers of Plaza de Mayo” formed to search for their lost children. The “Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo” soon emerged from this group to search for the grandchildren that their daughters or daughters-in-law had been carrying when they disappeared. This organization still exists today, actively searching out their now grown loved ones and utilizing many creative efforts. Included in these efforts are *Historietas por la Identidad*, *Teatro por la Identidad*, and *Musica por la Identidad*, respectively meaning Comics, Theatre, and Music for Identity. These creative methods raise the following question: How do comics, theatre, and music communicate in ways that words alone cannot? How have these projects helped to form identity? And finally, how is art in these projects used as a form of resistance? By analyzing the *Abuelas’* graphic narratives, theatre, and music, I argue that art surpasses the communicative abilities of words by conveying emotions and ideas that are “unspeakable” and appealing to a variety of audiences. The *Abuelas* use these art forms as resistance to dictatorial oppression and the silencing of truth, by helping to create individual identities and form Argentina’s collective memory.

During the era preceding the Dirty War, Peronism was the prevalent political party. The party was named for President Juan Perón, first elected in 1946, who put many social reforms into action that benefitted the poor and working class. However, social unrest characterized the time period. Perón was overthrown and exiled by the military in 1955, but he returned to be reelected in 1973. One year later he died, and his wife, Isabel Perón, succeeded him. By this time, two guerrilla groups were becoming active. The first was the Montoneros, a group of leftist Peronists, and the second was the Peoples Revolutionary Party (ERP), an armed guerrilla faction of the Revolutionary Workers Party. Simultaneously, death squads, who would kidnap or kill political opponents under the mask of night, became active. Right-wing groups were also forming, kidnapping increasingly politically active students. Furthermore, in 1975, Operation Condor was launched, a systematic approach to exterminate all rebel groups. On March 24, 1976, a three-man military junta staged a coup, installing General Jorge Rafael Videla as president. The new government passed the Statute for the Process of National Reorganization, which put all the executive, legislative, and judicial power in its hands. Under this new regime, the rate of disappearances skyrocketed so that for every two bodies found, nine people disappeared. The *desaparecidos* were taken to clandestine torture facilities. One survivor remembers,

Between sessions of the *picana*, they would use the submarine (holding our heads under water), hang us up by our feet, hit us on the sexual organs, beat us with chains, put salt on our wounds, and

use any other method that occurred to them. They would also apply 220-volt direct current to us. (Arditti 18)

As the death toll increased, the rebel groups eventually lost their leadership and strength to fight. As the presidency changed hands in rapid succession, violence died down and in 1983 democracy was restored to Argentina. However, the Dirty War resulted in between ten thousand and thirty thousand citizen casualties. Despite outrageous human rights violations, many of the crimes were covered up and many military personnel avoided punishment.

Every Thursday afternoon, from the late 1970s until 2006, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo held vigil for the desaparecidos outside of the president's palace. Many carried pictures of their lost children as they marched in non-violent protest. Under a regime of extreme oppression and censorship, under severe threat, these valiant women refused to be muted. From this organization arose Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo in 1977, a coalition of grandmothers looking for their grandchildren born in captivity. Many pregnant women who were kidnapped would miscarry due to physical torture. However, most who were allowed to give birth in captivity had their babies stolen from them, despite promises that the babies would be given to their families. After giving birth, the mothers were then killed. The babies were given to members of the military or sold to other sympathizers and adoptive parents who were willing to not ask questions. Four hundred of these children have been reported as missing, but the Abuelas are aware of about five hundred. These children were stripped of their identities and transposed into new families, into new false identities. The Abuelas investigate court records for suspicious adoption cases and spread information via newspapers, posters, and a plethora of other means. Starting in 1997, they started campaigns to attract people of the age range that their grandchildren currently fit into who had any doubts about the legitimacy of their identities. They also perform genetic tests to confirm identities when people come forward. In thirty years, eighty-seven of the children of the disappeared have been located. One child of a disappeared person is Pedro Luis Nadal García, who was reunited with his father, and his identity, after twenty-nine years, all thanks to the Abuelas. He says, "Saber mi verdadera identidad no tiene precio, son las cosas que siempre quise saber y que ahora poco a poco van escribiendo mi verdadera historia, la que me robaron hace 29 años" (Abuelas De Plaza de Mayo). In this case and in eighty-six similar cases, families were reunited, identities were repaired, and, piece by piece, Argentina's collective memory was patched.

The Por la Identidad projects include photography, dance, architecture, sports, and the three that will be analyzed here: theatre, graphic narratives, and music.

During the nineties, the Abuelas realized that the grandchildren they had been looking for were no longer children but young adults capable of taking over the search for their identities. This realization led to an explosion of creative, cultural initiatives geared toward raising awareness of the existence of these children and increasing consciousness of the 'right to identity.' (Werth 180)

Las Historietas por la Identidad are a set of brief graphic narratives developed through collaboration among artists and siblings of the children of the disappeared. From the perspective of the siblings, they appeal to their lost brother or sister who may be questioning his/her identity, and convey his/her true identity: his/her parents and family, why his/her parents were kidnapped and their fate, and the fact that a loving family is still searching and waiting with open arms. The goals of Las Historietas por la Identidad are, in translation, to "amplify the reach of the campaigns," to "reach more young people with doubts" and to have "society involve itself with

the problem” (Abuelas De Plaza de Mayo). The initiative was started by the Abuelas in 2008. El Teatro por la Identidad was initiated on June 5, 2000. It is an ongoing collection of short plays developed to bring the horrors of the Dirty War out of the shadows and cast light on the crime of the appropriation of children born in captivity. This past May 2013, the fifth edition of La Musica por la Identidad kicked off. It was a nine-day event with eighty musical groups performing, all to raise awareness for the remaining children of the disappeared, and the national right to identity. Tango por la Identidad, a contest for the best original song, is an offshoot of the idea that music can be used to find the disappeared, recreate identity, and preserve memory.

Several theories are intertwined in the argument that these art forms’ communicative abilities surpass those of literature and that the Abuelas utilize the projects to form identity and collective memory, thereby resisting oppression. It is important to have a mutual understanding of identity, collective memory, trauma, and empathy before proceeding. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines identity as “(noun) the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others” (Merriam-webster). The Oxford dictionary defines identity as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is” and “the characteristics determining this” (oxforddictionaries). The Abuelas advocate for the right to identity, which is not limited to genetic identity and one’s true name, but also his or her family history and the qualities and mannerisms that tie him/her to his/her family. Identity is a sense of self, and knowing the origins from which this self evolved.

Until the late 1970s it was thought that memory was an individual faculty, but since then it has been proven that social processes affect memory encoding.

Cultures are bound together by a shared set of beliefs, experiences, and memories. These shared histories cement individuals’ identities with the group to which they belong. Some of these historic memories and fixed events...others are not memories at all, but rather shared presumed memories or histories. (Pennebaker vii)

Collective memory is what a society recalls as its history, true or not. The Abuelas spread the true testimonies of the Dirty War to ensure that Argentina’s collective memory is factual and uncensored by those responsible for the human rights violations.

In the book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins forms a theory of the silencing of traumas. She asserts that “what survivors have witnessed has long been recognized as ‘unimaginable’ and ‘unspeakable’, although these epithets have often served as an excuse for neither imagining it nor speaking about it.” In a bout of symbolic violence, language is not strong enough to convey the worst traumas. However, oppressors also use this excuse to silence victims. It is easier to ignore what is unpleasant; and furthermore, if victims do not talk about their traumas then the perpetrators escape responsibility. The Abuelas battle this “unspeakableness” by speaking out about the trauma of baby stealing during the Dirty War. Edkins goes on to say that “the testimony of survivors can challenge structures of power and authority.” Victims’ testimonies let the truth be known, so that the offenders must accept the consequences for their actions. In cases where the government is at fault, as in Argentina, then the truths that the victims reveal challenge the government. According to this philosophy, I argue that the Abuelas’ work is a form of resistance.

In “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” Suzanne Keen discusses her theory of empathy. She defines empathy as “mirroring what a person might be expected to feel in that condition or context” (208). In other words, empathy means, “I feel your pain,” as opposed to sympathy, which is “I feel pity for your pain” (208). Keen conjectures that empathy can lead to pro-social

behavior. Therefore, feeling the trauma that victims felt should cause empathizers to want to do something to address the problem. Since the Abuelas aim to resist oppression and locate the desaparecidos, their artistic works play on empathy to evoke this pro-social behavior from the public.

Las Historietas por la Identidad weave together illustration, photography, and narration to reach a wide audience. Graphic narratives are an easily digestible and attention-grabbing source of information. Graphic narratives have been used by the UN, the World Health Organization, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and numerous NGOs to convey information to vast audiences (Chaney 63). They are easy to read and attractive to a target audience of young adults. Furthermore, “arraying boxes of witnessing, they narrativize and dramatize complex information at the same time that they intensify the affect of empathetic identification” (Chaney 62). Readers can identify with an avatar in a comic in ways in which they might not identify with a photograph, because it is easier to put oneself in the shoes of a nondescript person than one with whom they readily notice differences. Therefore, as the reader becomes the avatar, they will travel through the comic as that person, empathizing with his/her plight. This will lead to increased doubt about identity, or pro-social action.

One graphic narrative we will analyze is “Ramiro Menna Lanzillotto busca un/a hermano/a” by Matías Trilla. The first box reads, “Ana María Lanzillotto y Domingo Mema eran militantes del PRT-ERP,” stating right away the parents’ names and the fact that they were guerrillas (Trilla). These facts, stated overtly, are the cornerstones of the stolen identity: one’s true parents and the reason why he/she was separated from them. The comic goes on to tell how Ramiro, the older brother, was two years old and happily awaiting the birth of his little sibling when his parents, aunt, and uncle disappeared. The next four boxes are filled with black and white photographs of the mother, father, aunt, and uncle. In his book, *Graphic Subjects*, Michael Chaney argues:

Images and narratives constitute [memory’s] instruments and its very medium, extending well into subsequent generations. Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, because they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting. (Chaney 22)

The photographs that are used to show the disappeared only capture a brief moment of time past. The black and white headshots are reminiscent of mug shots. This is appropriate since these four were arrested for their guerrilla activity. However, used in conjunction with illustration and words, they form a narrative that forms an identity. They prove that the “disappeared” did exist, contrary to what General Videla may say.

The next box of the graphic narrative shows a saluting general in a wind-up tank shooting out skulls at the foot of a giant man in a suit, a wind-up airplane flying overhead. The tank reads “Proceso,” the law that gave all power to Videla, and “1976,” the year in which the coup took place. This wind-up tank symbolizes the mindless manner in which the military followed orders in committing horrendous human rights violations. Videla stands behind the tank, the holder of all power. The wind-up airplane is probably one of the planes that dumped dead bodies over the ocean. Next, the graphic narrative continues to relay the fate of the desaparecidos, and it shows two characters digging graves at night. The characters wear masks, representing how they never took responsibility for their crimes, and have black holes for eyes, symbolizing their soullessness and how they feigned obliviousness to their sins. They are of course doing their jobs under the

cover of night, in secrecy. Next it is written that the baby was born in captivity in September of 1976 and was stolen, thus adding information from which an identity will be constructed. Next, it says, “If you have doubts about your identity... You could be the brother/sister that Ramiro is looking for,” calling the reader to question the truth of their identity (Trilla). Finally, pictures of Ramiro and his two small sons are shown, and it is written, “they search for you too” (Trilla). This, along with a brightly colored, cheerful illustration of flowers and an invitation to contact the Abuelas, ends the graphic narrative on a note of hope. This testimony will become the identity of Ramiro’s long lost brother or sister, and will also add to the collective memory of the nation. The Abuelas publish these historietas to vocalize traumas and make the “unspeakable” speakable.

Through the Teatro por la Identidad performances, the Abuelas have mixed aesthetics with documentation to spread awareness far and wide. In the Abuelas mission statement for Teatro por la Identidad, they say,

como estas sombras van caminando a nuestro lado, hacemos
teatro para combatir las, para disolverlas, para nunca
descansar en el trabajo de exorcizarlas. Porque son oscuridades que
a nada temen más que a la reflexión. Pocas cosas son tan efectivas
en este combate como la sensibilidad, la duda, la emoción, el
recuerdo, la acción y el desesperado intento de entendernos y
convivir. Y esto es el teatro: duda, acción, emoción y convivencia.
(Teatro X La IDENTIDAD)

The performances create collective memory through testimony, instill doubt in the audience about their respective identities, play with emotion and empathy, and spread awareness. The pioneer play, staged on June 5, 2000, which was written by Patricia Zangaro and directed by Daniel Fanego, was titled “With Regard to Doubt.” The short play presents a couple of appropriators with their adopted son, who is unaware that he is adopted, unaware of his true identity. Three Abuelas come on the scene to argue that the young man should know his true identity while the appropriators argue the opposite. Then, a series of youths who have discovered their hidden identities come on the scene to try to convince the first young man that he should do the same. The young man is balding, whereas the “father” has a full head of hair. The young man gives a speech about how he is just like his dad, but he repeatedly halts in confusion as he happens upon incongruities. In the opening line of the play, the Abuelas ask each other, and the audience, “Isn’t baldness hereditary?” A choir of youths repeatedly asks, “And you, do you know who you are?” These methods urge the audience to question their own identities. The Abuelas advocate the right to identity by arguing, “for as long as there is a single person with their identity stolen and forged, the identity of all is in doubt” (Graham-Yooll 59).

A second play, first staged on October 8, 2002, is “In Labour” by Marta Betoldi, directed by Leonor Manso. This play focuses on two expectant mothers of the same age writing letters to their unborn children. One quickly ascertains that the first woman, Andrea, is in fact the second woman’s, Laura’s, mother. However, Andrea disappeared, and Laura was stolen, although Laura has no idea that her current identity is a lie. Once again, the audience is brought to doubt as Laura mentions little things that point to her appropriator not being her genetic mother. Andrea writes, “mum says don’t be silly, forget it, so I don’t talk about it much” (Graham-Yooll 77). This theme of forgetting and not talking about inconvenient topics is common of the Dirty War. In the play, this quote is a metaphor for a victim of trauma being told that his/her memories are “unspeakable” and “unthinkable,” simply so he/she will not speak or think of them. However, by

the testimony that this play offers, the victims are resisting the oppressors, and the truth is becoming the collective memory of the nation. After Laura learns her true identity, she says, “I am me. One can’t be so blind or so deaf not to see or hear, nor so dumb not to speak truths” (Graham-Yooll 92). In this quote, she both affirms her identity—the sense of self that she is now free to feel because she knows the truth about her parents—and she reiterates that the truth should be spoken. Powerful scenes in these Teatros, in addition to generating uncertainty in the audience, also generate empathy. For example, “In Labour” shows Andrea while she is being held prisoner, before she has given birth. She is dirty, disheveled, and in physical and emotional pain. The only thing she has to cling to is her unborn daughter, to whom she speaks to for strength. These images evoke strong empathy in the viewer. We feel the maternal love and sadness that Andrea and Laura will be ripped apart. The empathy resulting from powerful scenes such as this scene should, according to the theory of Keen, lead to pro-social action, which is the goal of the Abuelas. The multi-faceted ability of theater makes the Abuelas capable of achieving their goals.

Brownell [a theatre researcher and critic from Buenos Aires] identifies four levels of performance in the play, corresponding to (1) autobiographical testimony, (2) a “remake” of reconstruction of the parents’ youth, (3) role-playing of the other performers and their parents, and finally, (4) action, or moments of “pure performance. (Werth 194)

The testimony itself is the bones which resists oppression. The reconstruction of the parent’s youths spins the identity for whom los hijos de los desaparecidos are desperate. Both of these aspects, along with the role-playing of other performers, lend to the collective memory of Argentina. And finally, the “pure performance,” the heart-wrenching acting, is what evokes empathy in the viewers. Brownell’s four levels evident in Teatro por la Identidad make the theatre more effective than a less artistic, more mundane, and simply documentary-like method, while encompassing identity, collective memory, and societal awareness.

In the same way music can build suspense and terror in a horror film, pull to the surface poignant memories from long ago, and brighten a melancholy mood, music elicits emotional responses beyond the scope of the written word. The Abuelas use music as a tool to generate consciousness about the crime of appropriation of babies that occurred during the Dirty War, and the fact that there are still about four hundred children who are living with false identities. They use music to reach wider audiences. Music from the Musica por la Identidad concert and on the Tango por la Identidad songs playing on the radio provide even more avenues for their messages to take to peoples’ ears. People who may never pick up a newspaper, even the illiterate, can listen to music. As product advertising shows, lyrics get stuck in people’s heads, and subliminal messaging can take root. Songs have been used in multiple cases as memorialization for horrific events, for example in Peru about the Shining Path. The Shining Path was the communist party of Peru, and they were also classified as a terrorist organization due to their violent tactics, guerrilla warfare, massacres, and labor camps. In *Music, Politics, and Violence*, Susan Fast quotes Jonathan Ritter as saying, “testimonial songs cannot bear the full weight and responsibility of national memory, though I would argue that it is clearly impoverished without them. Rather, I see both... as complementary resources” (Fast 200). Music should not be the only acknowledgment of crime, but it is a method of diffusion and remembrance available to everyone as a part of daily life. The winning song of the Tango por la Identidad contest was

“Soy” written by Marcela Liliana Bublik, sung by Ana María Cores, and music by Raúl Garelo. The song is composed of poignant lyrics that are embodied in this verse:

Sé que hay alguien que me espera, sé que siempre me buscó,
que tiene aquella respuesta que enciende luz en la sombra.
El latido y la memoria corazonan la razón. (Bublik)

These lyrics speak to anyone who may have doubts about their past. The verse elicits hope and desire to know the truth. Through these lyrics, the Abuelas broadcast their message that the children of the disappeared are loved, searched for, and not forgotten. The light that they speak of is the truth that they fight for. The Abuelas refuse to let the government silence the truth—the truth that babies were stolen from victims and appropriated. The heartbeat of reason enforces the importance of truth in knowing one’s identity, and the innate manner in which family identification beats in one’s heart. It cannot be taken away and replaced through appropriation.

The song that received honorable mention was “Pertenencias” by Germán Cavallero, sung by Esteban Riera. Its lyrics speak about loss of identity:

Yo voy por comisuras del pasado
Buscando aquella voz que aún me nombra.
¿Quién soy? ¡Ya lo sabré!
¡Entero yo estaré
si junto los añicos de mi historia! (Cavallero)

These lyrics emphasize the importance of identity. One cannot feel whole without knowing one’s history. However, this work has a hopeful tone. Similar to “Soy,” these lyrics also refer to “the voice which calls to me,” meaning his/her real family who has been searching for him/her with the help of the Abuelas.

Music, which bears witness to traumas, adds them to the nation’s collective memory. It is a way to express political dissension in a very public sphere. The lyrics make the “unspeakable” speakable. However, it is not the lyrics alone that make music powerful. The musical arrangements work in conjunction with lyrics to create an emotionally powerful and memorable piece.

Each of these Por la Identidad projects—theatre, graphic narratives, and music—open up a new audience to the Abuela’s message of the right to identity. Furthermore, through music, images, and acting, emotions and ideas that cannot be expressed through language alone are conveyed. Therefore, traumas previously labeled as “unspeakable” and ignored are brought to the forefront. Victims refuse to remain silent, making no concessions for the perpetrators of the evil that occurred during the Dirty War, thereby resisting oppression. By telling their stories through Historietas por la Identidad, Musica por la Identidad, and Teatro por la Identidad, individual identities and an Argentine collective memory are created.

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